

SOCIAL ROOTS OF THE BHAGAVAD-GĪTĀ

The *Srīmad-Bhagavad-Gītā* occurs in the *Bhīṣma Parva* of the *Mahā-bhārata* and comprises 18 chapters from 25th to 42nd. It contains the report by Sañjaya of a dialogue between the Pāṇḍava hero Arjuna and his Yadu charioteer Kṛṣṇa on the battlefield just on the eve of the war. The actual fighting is about to begin when Arjuna seems to undergo a metamorphosis and feels a revulsion at the leading part which he was to play in the impending extermination of his kinsmen. With his mind restless and full of doubts, Arjuna refuses to fight but the exhortations of Lord Kṛṣṇa answer his every doubt through a philosophical discourse, till Arjuna is ready to surrender himself completely to the *fait accompli* and agrees to bend his whole mind to the great killing.

1. Its Date

The 700 verses of the *Gītā* are broadly an attempt to work out a synthesis between the various philosophical schools. It outlines each preceding doctrine in a masterly way without naming or evaluating it, and with consummate skill passes smoothly on to another when Arjuna tries to bring out the inherent contradiction between that doctrine and the practice which the latter was being asked to follow. Although the doctrines reviewed by the Lord are mutually incompatible, that is avoided obviously because all views are simply facets of the one divine mind. Naturally the best in each system is identified with the supreme God¹. Since all views come from the one god, there is no polemic so characteristic of Indian philosophical disputations, though Vedic *yajña*

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1. *Gītā*, VII.8-13; X.20-40.

and ritual in general are slighted with a passing sneer. The *Upaniṣads* are well- but anonymously-represented, though the *Svetāśvatara Upaniṣad* alone contains the germ of *bhakti*, while none of them has anything to say about the theory of perfection through a large succession of rebirths². Obviously these were post-*Upaniṣadic* doctrines and the latter, i.e. the function of *karma*, is characteristically Buddhistic. Certain stanzas of the *Gītā* bear an indelible mark of the current Buddhist philosophy³. The emphasis on abandoning all desires in order to achieve peace⁴ is probably a result of the impact of Buddhist teachings. Similarly the *brahma-nirvāṇa*⁵ is the Buddhist ideal state of escape from the effect of *karma*. Other unlabelled-schools of thought such as *Sāṅkhya* and *Mīmāṃsā* down to early *Vedānta*⁶ can be also traced from the *Gītā* suggesting the embryonic stage of their development when the text was being composed. On the basis of these internal evidences it can be suggested that the text was composed somewhere between A.D. 150-350, nearer the later than the earlier date. The ideas are older and they have nothing original to say, except perhaps the novel use of *bhakti* with all its manifestations and elaborate treatment. The language is high classical Sanskrit such as could not have been written much before the Guptas, though the metre still shows the occasional irregularity in *triṣṭubhs*, characteristic of the *Mahābhārata* as a whole⁷. This will obviously mean that the *Gītā* has to be dated to near or in the early part of the Gupta period. This is further supported by the fact that the Sanskrit of the classical Gupta phase, shortly after the time of the *Gītā*, became more careful in versification.

2. The Contemporary Material Melieu

The period of the compilation of the *Gītā* synchronises with certain novel developments in Indian society. The basis of these developments was the grants of land which formed a significant trait of the *Sāta-vāhana* administration. Contemporary inscriptions show that the *Sāta-vāhanas* started the practice of granting fiscal and administrative immunities to *brāhmaṇas* and Buddhist monks. One of the earliest epigraphic grant of land is to be found in the *Nānāghat Cave Inscription* of *Nāgnikā*, wherein villages have been bestowed on the priests for officiating at Vedic sacrifices⁸, without mentioning any type of concession. For the

2. D. D. KOSAMBI, *Myth and Reality*, Bombay, 1962, p. 16.

3. Without Buddhism, *Gītā*, II.55-72 would be impossible.

4. *Gītā*, II.70-71.

5. *Ibid.*, II.70; V.25.

6. Cf. *ibid.*, XV.15. This is further supported by the reference to *Brahma-sūtra* in *Gītā*, XIII.14.

7. Cf. *ibid.*, VIII.10^a, 11^b; XV.3^a, & c.

8. D. C. SIRCAR, *Select Inscriptions Bearing on Indian History and Civilisation*, I, Calcutta, 1942, II, no. 82.

first time these concessions, which amount to delegation of administrative rights, appear in grants made by Gautamīputra Śātakarṇi in the first quarter of the second century A.D. to Buddhist monks and include the surrender of royal rights to the procurement of salt from cultivated fields which, though in actual practice may not have been found in every field, indicates the process of feudal emergence. Furthermore, the land granted to them could not be entered by royal troops, disturbed by government officials, or interfered with by the district police⁹. This tantamounts to leaving the administration of the donated area completely in the hands of the beneficiaries. Between c. A.D. 150-350 this tendency was further strengthened so as to pave the way for the feudalisation of not only the administrative machinery but the society at large. This also created non-peasant private rights to the produce of the land¹⁰. This development is further corroborated by an inscription of the third century A.D. which outlines « the practice of letting out land to cultivators who received half the produce »¹¹. We have thus unmistakable evidence for both non-peasant land-owners and their counterparts, share-croppers.

This brings us to an interesting problem. D. D. Kosambi has postulated a stage around the beginning of the Christian era, when closed peasant-village economy prevailed with practically no superior land-owning class or overlords, and only limited authority and exactions claimed by the king¹². But in course of time the king alienated his rights to subordinate chiefs who ruled in their own right and did what they liked within their own territories as long as they paid the paramount ruler¹³. It disturbed the earlier arrangement and now it were the chiefs who came to have direct relations with the peasantry, a process which Kosambi terms as « Feudalism from above »¹⁴. He thinks that this particular stage of development reached an advanced stage of growth during the period of the Guptas (4th-5th centuries A.D.) and of Harṣa (first half of the 7th century A.D.). This stage was followed by the development of « a class of landowners » from within the village. Kosambi has termed this later development as « Feudalism from below »¹⁵.

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 192, 194-95.

10. D. D. KOSAMBI, *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History*, Bombay, 1975, pp. 274-75.

11. L. GOPAL in « Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient », Vol. VI, no. 3 (1963), p. 306.

12. D. D. KOSAMBI, *op. cit.*, pp. 251-58. This stage of society, according to Kosambi, was « proto-feudal » (*ibid.*, p. 255).

13. *Ibid.*, p. 295.

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 295-96.

Kosambi's theorisation has been attacked¹⁶ and he seems to over simplify the situation¹⁷. The very existence of non-peasant landholders and share-croppers in this period goes against his description of a «proto-feudal system». R. S. Sharma too appears to reject — for he does not explicitly join issue with Kosambi on this point — the hypothesis that a land-owning class above the peasantry did not come into existence until the later centuries of the first millennium B.C.¹⁸. He concludes that a *svāmī* or owner existed over the actual tiller and the former leased their lands to «temporary cultivators»¹⁹. Leaving aside the purely academic nature of this debate, it can be asserted that the emerging land system was certainly the basis of the emerging feudal set-up.

The emergence of graded and unequal relationships, which is a characteristic feature of feudal hierarchy, can also be noticed during this period. The Sātavāhana political functionaries provide one of the earliest instances of the use of the title *mahā* or great. The kings of the Sātavāhana dynasty call themselves *rājā*, though the term *mahārāja* is also mentioned in their inscriptions. Some other designations such as *mahāsenāpati*, *mahārathī*, *mahābhoja*, *mahātālavāra*, etc., also occur in the inscriptions, which are considered to be the epithets of the feudatories of the Sātavāhanas. Some feudatories closely followed the imperial pattern so much so that the Mahārathīs not only bore metronymics like the Sātavāhanas but also enjoyed hereditary status, enabling them to issue coins and grant villages in their own right²⁰. Some of these titles were also adopted by the Ikṣavākus, Chuṭus, Viṣṇukunḍins, etc., together with some branches of the Sātavāhanas, who were evidently the feudatories of the main branch. The adoption of the titles of *mahārāja*, *rājātirāja*, etc., by the Kuṣāṇa kings indicate a similar development²¹. Such titles imply the existence of lesser kings and chiefs who stood in the relation of feudatories to the sovereign power, for the king is called *mahārāja* or the great king in the relation to other *rājās* or kings, who do not enjoy that position. Similarly he is called *rājātirāja* or the supreme king of kings in relation to other subordinate kings in his kingdom. The feudatory character of the Kuṣāṇa political system can

16. The appropriateness of the terms «Feudalism from above» and «Feudalism from below» has been questioned from the Marxist point of view also by a number of competent authorities.

17. This he does by bringing under the head «Feudalism from below» different types of feudalism, that of the early medieval period, that of the late Rajput period, and that associated with Turko-Afghan Sultans and the Mughal kings. Moreover, this term seems to convey the impression that the establishment of feudal estates was independent of the authority of central government. Cf. L. GOPAL, *The Economic Life of Northern India* (c. A.D. 700-1200), Banaras, 1965, p. 232.

18. R. S. SHARMA, *Aspects of Political Ideas and Institutions in Ancient India*, Delhi, 1959, pp. 222-23.

19. *Ibid.*

20. D. C. SIRCAR, *op. cit.*, II, no. 85, 11.2-3.

21. *Ibid.*, II, no. 51, 1.2; cf. p. 124.

also be inferred from some other titles. Thus the title *mahīśvara* adopted by Wema Kadphises II²² means the great lord. The title *sarvaloka-īśvara*²³ means the lord of the whole world. Thus, these titles indicate a feudatory organisation consisting of tributary states or chiefs. Similarly the adoption of the designations like *daṇḍanāyaka*, *mahādaṇḍanāyaka*, etc., by the Kuṣāṇa officials indicates a graded hierarchy of the same type of officers. In fact, the use of the prefix *mahā* implies the introduction of graded and unequal relationships and marks the beginning of the titles which became popular in feudal hierarchy in the early medieval period. Thus by c. A.D. 350 feudal beginnings had been made in India and it should be properly comprehended that the *Gītā* was composed at a time when feudal institutions were in a travail. The *Gītā* was the product of this transitional phase in Indian society.

3. The Class Bias

That the *Gītā* was sung for the upper classes with a distinct bias against the lower orders of the society is beyond doubt. In fact the professional writer before the machine age was a tertiary member of the leisure class, which in turn included and was appended (as was priesthood) to the ruling class. This class literature had two distinct categories. The first was an exclusive preserve of the class in power, private literature not accessible to the common man. This is typical of all Sanskrit, so that D.D. Kosambi, following Thorstein Veblen, calls its patronage a method of conspicuous consumption²⁴. The second category included the broader literature which served all society but this too became saturated with the ideas of the ruling class, taking on the appearance of a tool for domination. The theme or approach of this type of literature must be traditionally familiar to the people at large, accepted by society as a whole, thus suitable for embroidery with special class glorification and with ideas connected with the exploitation of the lower sections of the society. The *Gītā* should be placed in this category.

The *Gītā* was certainly an attempt at the domination of the society by the ruling class. Kṛṣṇa himself proclaims, « For those who take refuge in Me, be they even of the sinful breeds such as women, vaiśyas, and śūdras... », will be freed in the after life²⁵. The unmistakable message of the passage is that all women and all the members of the producing and working classes are defiled by their very birth. This idea was in tune with the emerging feudal ideology in which women, vaiśyas

22. *Ibid.*, II, no. 31, I.1.

23. *Ibid.*

24. *The Subhāṣitaratnakoṣa* (eds. D.D. Kosambi and V.V. Gokhale), Harvard University Press, 1957, p. LVII.

25. *Gītā*, IX.32.

and śūdras came to be grouped together. Thus, whereas in earlier times the various crafts and industries were ordained even for the śūdras, in the phase of feudal development the artisan class came to be despised²⁶. It is to be noted that in the feudal societies of Japan, China and Europe also both artisans and women occupied a very low status.

Another noteworthy point is that the *Gītā* was to be sung for the upper classes by the brāhmaṇas, and only through them for others. In fact, the lower classes were necessary as an audience, and the heroic lays of the *bhārata* war drew them to the recitation of the *Mahābhārata*. This gave the epic an envious status as a very convenient vehicle for any doctrine which the brāhmaṇas wanted to insert, even better than rewriting the *Purāṇas* or faking new *Purāṇas* for age-old cults. It seems that the brāhmaṇas got dissatisfied even with the profits derived from the *Gītā*. So, we have the *Anu-gītā*²⁷ as a prominent sequel in the 14th Canto (*Aśvamedha-parvan*), which purports to be a summary of the original *Gītā* but actually it is an incredibly shoddy version simply extolling Brāhmaṇism and the brāhmaṇas. Thus, the purpose of the *Anu-gītā* becomes all the more clear, and it probably aimed at widening the limited scope of class domination.

4. The Feudal Elements

The *Gītā* clearly indicates the emergence of a feudal society. The emergence of a graded and unequal system of relationships, which is an important aspect of feudal hierarchy, is mentioned in the text. It refers to *mahārathas* at least at four different places²⁸. At one place it refers to a *mahābāhu*²⁹. The very use of the title *mahā* indicates the introduction of feudal hierarchy. Obviously the *mahārathas* were feudatories who were summoned to fight on behalf of their feudal overlord at the time of the war. This concept of graded relationships had so much permeated the society that even objects like conches were described on its basis³⁰.

Besides the emergence of a feudal hierarchy, the *Gītā* also hints at certain aspects of chivalry. During the first feudal age, what was implied by the term *chevalier*, knight, was primarily a status determined either by a *de facto* situation or by a legal tie, the criterion being purely personal. In either case the military aspect was dominant and one was called the *chevalier* of someone when he held a fief of that

26. V. K. THAKUR, *Beginnings of Feudalism in Bengal*, « Social Scientist », nos. 66-67 (Jan.-Feb., 1978), p. 76.

27. There is an *Uttaragītā* also, a quite modern apocryphal work.

28. *Gītā*, I.4, 6, 17; II.35.

29. *Ibid.*, I.18.

30. *Ibid.*, I.15.

person, on condition of serving him armed on a horseback³¹. When Duryodhana describes both his own forces and the forces of the Pāṇḍavas³² one gets the unmistakable impression that *chevaliers* were fighting on both the sides.

Another parallel that can be drawn between the message of the *Gītā* and medieval European feudalism is in terms of religious warfare. The medieval European society witnessed the sanction of religion for feudal wars which came to be known as Crusades. The *Gītā* also represents a similar situation. The struggle between the Kauravas and the Pāṇḍavas was a *dharmayuddha*, a religious and righteous war. Lord Kṛṣṇa exhorts Arjuna to fight the war because it was in accordance with the *dharma* of the latter³³. Thus, the *Gītā* certainly represents certain basic feudal norms and practices because of the specific purpose for which it was composed.

5. The Social Relevance of Bhakti

An important innovation made by the *Gītā* was the doctrine of *bhakti*, unflinching loyalty to a god whose rather questionable personal record was not allowed to stand in the way. The new doctrine had certain important constituents in the form of complete surrender, total devotion and *śraddhā* to the lord from the devotees. The *Gītā*, time and again, exhorts the devotee to surrender completely to the Lord³⁴. Similarly the virtues of unwavering devotion to the Lord have also been recounted. It has been emphasised that only devotion leads to the attainment of peace and the god³⁵. It has been suggested that one should act after surrendering to the Lords³⁶ and in the same vein Lord Kṛṣṇa asks Arjuna to fight after completely surrendering himself to the former³⁷. Those who serve the Lord with unswerving devotion attain their goal³⁸. Devotion is such a pleasing force that any thing offered to the Lord with devotion is readily accepted³⁹ and his devotees are never destroyed⁴⁰. Even wicked persons⁴¹, women, vaiśyas and śūdras⁴² can please the Lord if they are totally devoted to him. But at the same

31. MARC BLOCH, *Feudal Society* (tr. L. A. Manyon), Vol. II, London, 1965, p. 314.

32. *Gītā*, I.4-10.

33. *Ibid.*, II.31-34.

34. *Ibid.*, IV.10; XVIII.56-57.

35. *Ibid.*, VI.14; VIII.14, 22; IX.29; XVIII.55.

36. *Ibid.*, III.30.

37. *Ibid.*, VIII.7.

38. *Ibid.*, XIV.26.

39. *Ibid.*, IX.26.

40. *Ibid.*, IX.31.

41. *Ibid.*, IX.30.

42. *Ibid.*, IX.32.

time the *Gītā* also emphasises the harm that can be caused to a person not devoted to his Lord. It is specifically said that while devotion leads to success, its lack leads to failure⁴³. Those who lack devotion have been outrightly condemned. They are called evil doers, deluded, lowest of men⁴⁴, fools⁴⁵ and *āsurika*⁴⁶.

Similarly the *Gītā* also highlights the importance of *śraddhā*. One who has *śraddhā* for his Lord is bound to attain the goal⁴⁷ and the best *yogī* is one with *śraddhā*⁴⁸. Such is its importance that worship of any form with *śraddhā* is paying⁴⁹. The message is explicit, blind faith is of supreme importance irrespective of the person to whom one is devoted. This idea becomes all the more clear when the *Gītā* suggests that unconditional *śraddhā* is the best⁵⁰. While everything can be achieved through *śraddhā*, a person bereft of the same is finished⁵¹ and he returns to the path of rebirth fraught with death⁵². And to drive the point home, the *Gītā* asserts that any action or practice performed without *śraddhā* is *asat*⁵³. The theory of *bhakti* was developed to a point where it meant a complete control of the Lord over his devotees so much so that it came to be asserted that only he who works for the Lord is freed⁵⁴. The logical culmination of such a theory was the exhortion of blindly following the Lord⁵⁵ as well as blindly acting on his orders⁵⁶.

This doctrine of *bhakti* suited the feudal ideology perfectly. This new form of piety was completely in tune with the social outlook of the times, when the feudatories considered themselves meditating at the feet of their masters. In fact, the essence of fully developed feudalism is the chain of personal loyalty binding retainer to chief, tenant to lord, and baron to king. This loyalty was not something abstract but had a secure foundation in the means and relations of production: land-ownership, military service, tax collection, etc. During the Gupta period the final transition was being made towards this new system. The new landowners were now personally responsible to the king, and part of a tax-gathering mechanism. With the development of feudalism there emerged a new class of people at the village level who had special

43. *Ibid.*, XVIII.58.

44. *Ibid.*, VII.15.

45. *Ibid.*, IX.11.

46. *Ibid.*, XVI.6-20.

47. *Ibid.*, IV.39.

48. *Ibid.*, VI.47; XII.2.

49. *Ibid.*, VII.21.

50. *Ibid.*, XVII.18-19.

51. *Ibid.*, III.32; IV.40.

52. *Ibid.*, IX.3.

53. *Ibid.*, XVII.28.

54. *Ibid.*, XI.55.

55. *Ibid.*, III.21.

56. *Ibid.*, III.7.

rights over the land (of cultivation, occupation or hereditary ownership). This new class probably performed special armed service as well as service in tax-collection. To hold this type of society together without much opposition from the exploited groups, the best religion was one which emphasised the role of *bhakti*, even though the object of blind devotion may have had clearly visible flaws⁵⁷. It was, in fact, the ideological basis of the feudal society and it was this loyalty that lay at the base of feudalism which led to the strengthening of many primitive practices in a context that was certainly not barbarous. Court nobles cut off their own flesh publicly to save the life of Harṣa's father. Many inscriptions vaunt the Gāṅga and Pallava barons' sacrifice of their own heads in front of some idol, to confer benefit upon their king⁵⁸. Many vassals proclaim their determination not to survive the overlord for a single moment and some of them actually leapt into the flames which consumed their royal master's corpse⁵⁹. This was the crudest manifestation of the ideology of *bhakti*. Thus, it is no coincidence that with the dawn of the final stage of Indian feudalism do we get Śaṅkara and the promotion of the *Gītā* to the summit.

6. The Social Significance of the Theory of Karma⁶⁰

The *Gītā* makes detailed references to the theory of *Karma*, according to which the character, fortune, social status, happiness or sorrow of a person depended on his actions of the previous birth. Naturally, to better the next life the text outlines some of the principles, which clearly betray the class character of this doctrine. The *Gītā* says, «Thy right is to work only; but never to the fruits thereof. Be thou not the producer of the fruits of (thy) actions; neither let thy attachment be towards inaction»⁶¹. The message is clear and simple; one has to work without thinking of any gain but this should not in anyway lead to inaction. In passage after passage the idea of non-attachment with the fruits of one's action has been emphasised⁶². A person can not get attainment if he makes plans and wishes for the fruit of action⁶³. While distinguishing between *Sāttvika* and *Tāmasika* actions, it is em-

57. That Kṛṣṇa was a master who cared little either for morality or ethical values is amply illustrated by the different episodes of the *Mahābhārata* story.

58. D. D. KOSAMBI, *Myth and Reality*, p. 32.

59. *Ibid.*, pp. 32, 40-41, n. 28-29.

60. *Karma* primarily means action, but in the context of Indian philosophy it has come to mean some sort of a determinism; one's present is a result of the actions of the previous birth. Another meaning of *karma* often used in reference to one's caste or position in life, is duty, the course of conduct which one ought to follow in pursuance of his actions, etc., of the last birth.

61. *Gītā*, II.47.

62. *Ibid.*, II, 48, 49, 50, 51, 55; III.19; IV.19-20; VI.4; XVIII.6.

63. *Ibid.*, VI.2.

phasised that action without any desire for fruit is the best, while action undertaken through delusion, etc., is the worst⁶⁴. As a logical culmination, this theory was evolved into a theory of determinism. While advising Arjuna to fight, Kṛṣṇa tells him that all things and incidents are inevitable⁶⁵. At another place he tells Arjuna that even without the latter's resolve to fight, none of the warriors arrayed in the hostile armies could remain alive⁶⁶; obviously they are bound to die in the battlefield because of their actions in the previous birth. And finally Kṛṣṇa tells him that even if he did not resolve to fight, he will be actually forced to fight by his own *karma*⁶⁷. This was a purely deterministic philosophy, a philosophy which not only aimed at maintaining the *status quo* but also bred helplessness, submission, illusory happiness even with one's pathetic condition and aversion for fulfilment.

The indoctrination of the masses in the theory of *karma* must have become a powerful factor which helped to preserve the mechanism of exploitation and thus to keep the lower sections of the society under check. This was certainly a cleverly applied tool of exploitation for it appealed even to the lower orders. Now a *śūdra* too, reeling under the burden of exploitation in the present birth, could hope to be reborn as a *brāhmaṇa* in the next birth if he acted « favourably ». Moreover, it also made them to believe that their deplorable condition was due to the bad deeds of their previous birth. Obviously for the considerations of the next birth, Arjuna finally agrees to be a leading party to the large-scale killings of even his own relatives and kinsmen. In a society dominated by such religious ideologies it was easier to fully exploit the masses because such a belief did not permit them to blame their miseries on human agencies, and promoted a general belief in the necessity of adhering to the *Brāhmaṇical* normatives prescribed for them. The development of such an ideology must have proved to be a boon for the feudal lords in exploiting the masses without any compunction on either part.

7. Maintenance of Social Order and the Messianic Spirit

In tune with its character the *Gītā* also makes a deliberate attempt to maintain the contemporary social order, i.e. *status quo*, a condition which was beneficial for the ruling class. The theory of *karma*, besides generating a belief in supernatural agencies for all miseries, also helped the maintenance of the social structure. *Karma* also meant the perfor-

64. *Ibid.*, XVIII.23-25.

65. *Ibid.*, II.26-27.

66. *Ibid.*, XI.32.

67. *Ibid.*, XVIII.59-61.

mance of one's own duty without any deviation⁶⁸ and this naturally implied a complete adherence to contemporary Brāhmaṇical social norms as well as the caste set-up. Only by performing one's caste duties could one hope for a better deal in the next birth.

The *Gītā* has tried to provide divine sanction to the existing social system in certain cruder ways also. Kṛṣṇa declares, «The fourfold caste was created by Me...»⁶⁹. He also maintains that the caste duties were distributed by him in accordance with the *guṇas* and only by adhering to these duties can one attain perfection⁷⁰. To make a fool-proof case, it is further maintained that one's own *dharma* (caste-duty, etc.) howsoever imperfect, is better than the *dharma* of others and by following one's own *dharma* only one can attain perfection⁷¹. To drive the point home the caste-duties have been glorified and it is said that a kṣatriya fighting for a righteous cause (and the justification of a cause solely lay in the hands of the ruling class) at once goes to heaven⁷². Thus, all duties should be performed with complete devotion to the lord, a situation which not only helped the ruling class through the maintenance of *status quo* but also helped the feudal set-up by keeping the producers servile even on the face of extreme exploitation by the feudal lords.

The maintenance of the social order was also helped by the messianic aspect of Vaiṣṇavism which became socially further meaningful in the context of the developing feudal structure of the time. It was a theory of incarnations, first mentioned in the *Gītā* and developed further under the influence of the *bodhisattva* doctrine of Mahāyāna Buddhism⁷³. According to some texts Viṣṇu goes through as many as 39 *avatāras*, though generally the number is fixed at 10. In all these incarnations Viṣṇu is supposed to come on this earth as a saviour, a messiah. Lord Kṛṣṇa makes one of the crudest declarations when he asserts, «Whenever... there is decline of *Dharma*, and rise of *Adharma*, then I come on this earth in every age for the protection of the good and the destruction of the wicked as well as for the restoration of *Dharma*»⁷⁴. The message was simple; the god was conscious of the happenings on the earth and periodically he was to come to destroy the *adhārmic* and to protect the *dhārmic*. Such a belief fostered a hope in the coming of a redeemer who would deliver his devotees from the miseries of the world and at the same time destroy others. This acted both as an allurements as well as a threat. This idea must have particularly appealed

68. In this sense *karma* was akin to Plato's concept of «Justice» as outlined in his *Republic*.

69. *Gītā*, IV.13.

70. *Ibid.*, IV.13; XVIII.41-45.

71. *Ibid.*, III.35; XVIII.47.

72. *Ibid.*, II.31-32.

73. D. D. KOSAMBI, *op. cit.*, pp. 31-2.

74. *Gītā*, IV.7-8; also see, *ibid.*, VII.6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12; IX.4, 7; X.20-40; XI; XV.18.

to the exploited sections of the society as it gave them a ray of hope for future thereby throttling all protests against their present plight and exploitation.

Thus, the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, in spite of its logical inconsistencies, was thoroughly grounded in the contemporary material *milieu*. It was the product of a class/caste ridden society and shaped itself as a vehicle of upper class domination. The nascent feudal structure was well helped by the ideas propounded by the *Gītā*. It not only helped the maintenance of *status quo* but through the ideas of *bhakti*, *karma* and messianic spirit made the working class servile and hapless.